

# NACA NEWS

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## Public Education and Proactive Outreach

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# Shoot or Shoo?

## Partnering with law enforcement to reduce dog shootings and halt the headlines

By Lisa Norwood, City of Antonio Animal Care Services

In the split-second world our law enforcement officers work in, a charging dog is often treated no differently than a suspect waving a gun. Because police-canine interactions are increasingly making headlines (and civil court dockets), it makes sense for animal control agencies to help our brothers and sisters in law enforcement understand dog behavior and non-lethal options for dealing with it.

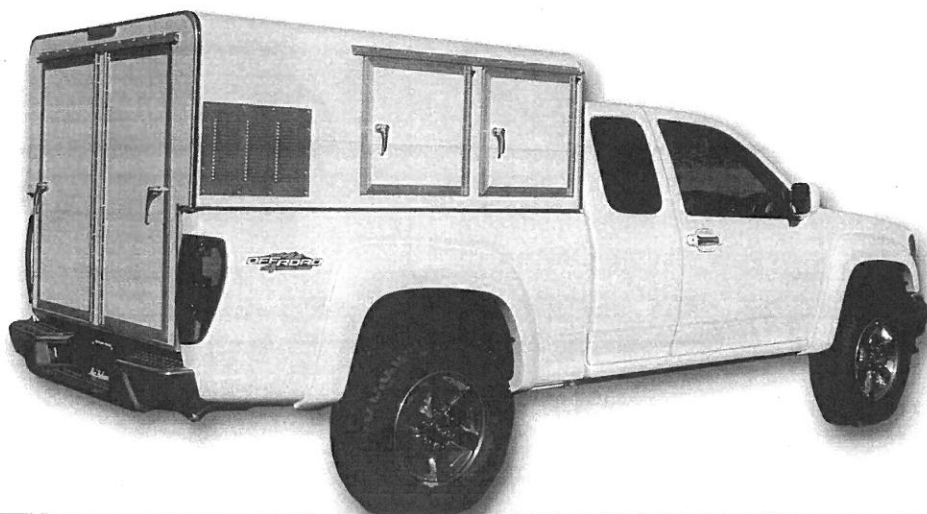
It's a proactive approach that made sense for the City of San Antonio's Animal Care Services (ACS) and Police Department (SAPD). While both agencies have fostered an environment of innovation and progressive change, interactions with overtly aggressive dogs caused ongoing concern as did general animal-related issues. Last year, the decision was made to create a comprehensive training seminar entitled "Focus on Animal Law Enforcement-Pets, Policy and Public Safety." Although the three hour workshop touches on a number of animal control topics, the primary thrust of the training concerns behavior recognition, officer safety, and alternatives to lethal force. The course, officially approved by

the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (TCOLE), is taught during the weekly in-service schedule at the SAPD training academy. Every officer on the SAPD force rotates through the annual training module which is regularly updated to reflect the latest techniques and trends in progressive policing. With the success of the San Antonio classes, Animal Care Services trainers have also trained law enforcement in the coastal Texas cities of Corpus Christi and Robstown as well as La Salle and Nueces Counties.

Long recognized as one of the most community oriented law enforcement agencies in the country, leadership at the San Antonio Police Department immediately signed on for the enhanced dog behavior training. "Although this training hasn't and will never eliminate all dog shootings by officers, it does give us that extra awareness. Additionally, the public can rest assured in knowing that trained officers are making a more conscious decision before acting," says SAPD Sergeant Javier Salazar. Each week, the class covers canine behaviors including signs of escalating aggression, practical pacification

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techniques and a dog-centric use of force continuum that maximizes non-lethal approaches but also openly discusses deadly force.

The proactive partnership puts the Alamo City in front of a burgeoning trend across the country. With the most recent statistics from the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) indicating 37 percent of all households owning a dog, municipal agencies are looking for ways to reduce negative dog encounters with their police forces. States are legislating change as well. The State of Colorado now mandates dog behavior training that includes a full review of non-lethal methods for all police officers. Illinois and Tennessee laws take a similar stance, and mandatory dog behavior training is under consideration for peace officers in Georgia, Oregon, California, Maryland and Idaho.

And it's not just about enhancing overall safety in canine encounters; public confidence in municipal government can take a hit when dog run-ins turn fatal. The issue has become so relevant nationally that the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services publishes training materials on the topic, including the downloadable police focused handbook, "The Problem of Dog-Related Incidents and Encounters."

Further evidence can be seen in the number of recent state capitol rallies held nationally by the grassroots canine advocacy group, Freeze Don't Shoot. More than 200 Facebook groups with thousands of listed members regularly plan pro-

tests and circulate worldwide petitions when police/canine encounters go wrong. Body-cam video showing a Cleburne, Texas police officer shooting a dog this summer has gone viral on the Web and more than 50 thousand people have signed a petition demanding the officer's badge. The Cleburne incident (and the official response) has also attracted the attention of a group claiming to be Anonymous, a worldwide collective of hackers dedicated to "advocating" via cyber attacks.

Because pets are legally considered property, owners of dogs shot in encounters with police often sue for violation of their Fourth Amendment rights. Some states allow those suits to proceed with requests for financial relief that go beyond an animal's market value; they also allow damages connected to an owner's emotional distress and loss of companionship. A 2003 case saw a North Carolina family receive more than \$75 thousand in an out of court settlement after their dog was shot during a tense traffic stop with Tennessee Highway Patrol. A case out of Chicago saw a federal jury award more than \$300 thousand to a family whose dog was shot by police during the execution of a search warrant.

In some jurisdictions, the resultant media firestorm and citizen pressure has also led to disciplinary action and criminal charges against officers involved in fatal dog interactions. Officer Vincent Medley, ACS Assistant Director, says it makes sense for animal control and law enforcement to be on the same page tactically—for internal and external customers.

*(continued on page 26)*



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"Public safety is a combination of proactive solutions paired with awareness of every party's role in creating and sustaining a safe community," says Medley. "This cooperative training helps turn these lose-lose interactions into situations in which everyone wins."

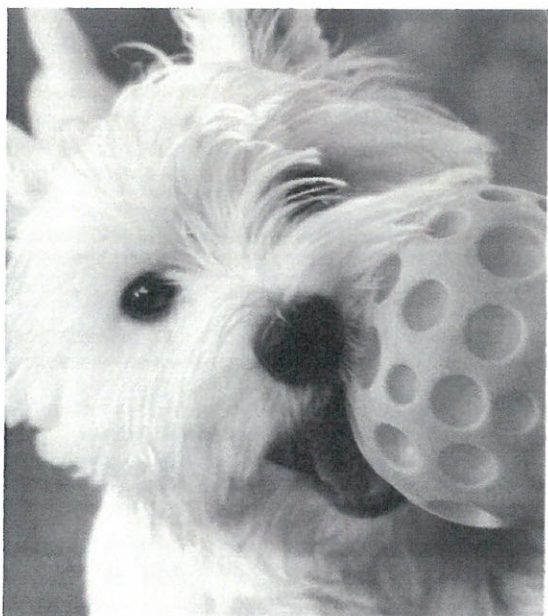
Agencies interested in partnering with their local police or sheriff's department to reduce negative encounters shouldn't wait until the headlines start. Do your homework. What type of training does your municipality or state mandate for peace officers? Do those guidelines require certified lesson plans, written testing, etc? Can officers receive continuing education credit for classes taught by third parties? By researching this information prior to your conversation, you're showing respect for your law enforcement agency's processes and laying the groundwork for a successful training partnership that benefits everyone. "We knew straight away the seminar had to be relevant and respectful to our police department's needs, but it also needed to fully explain the importance of learning alternative approaches to dealing with canine aggression—for the pets and the public," says Officer Medley. Sergeant Salazar agrees. "By understanding the subtle differences in canine behavior patterns, officers are much better equipped than in years past to recognize and differentiate between behaviors that may not be an actual threat to them."

Mutual understanding and respect are key, but training

collaborations should also focus on enhancing communication—from both parties. Both animal control and traditional law enforcement can use trainings to identify other enhancements like after-hours response, investigative assistance and positive media relations. The last point resonates with Salazar who understands the power of proactive press coverage. "In today's world, with social media added to the mix, everything we do has the potential to go viral in a matter of minutes. Not only does everything we do have to BE right, it has to LOOK right, even under increased scrutiny," says Salazar.

Field staff naturally benefits from the improved everyday working relationships and the community (including the press) gain a greater appreciation for the teamwork involved in securing public safety. "By listening before we start talking," Medley says, "we can create tools to keep people, pets and peace officers safe. Everyone's happy and everyone gets to go home." Most would agree that's the best possible ending to any story.

*Lisa Norwood worked as a TV journalist for more than a decade in Texas and Arizona. Something told her to turn down yet another television job in hopes something better would come along and it did...a dream job doing public relations at the City of San Antonio's animal shelter. Lisa has helped get San Antonio's Animal Care Services featured in the Wall Street Journal, USA Today, CNN, Texas Monthly, animal trade publications and thousands of stories with local media. ❖*



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